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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experiences of an English teacher from Washington State University who taught English in Japan for a year. The teacher concluded after her year in Japan that the country is and has been involved in a less-than-conscious national effort to "stonewall" the effective teaching of English as a second language in all its forms. The position is taken that essential change for English education in Japan comes down to two possibilities: either English education must seriously include verbal skills and cultural understanding, allowing the incorporation of English into the broader scope of life in Japan, or the requirement for English as a second language in public schools should be dropped and the incredible amount of public money spent instead on other national problems. It is noted that Japanese teachers rarely teach their English classes in English--teaching their students to read and to write English, but steadfastly avoiding teaching them to speak or understand spoken English. Even teachers who participated in intensive language training in America rarely taught their classes in English. In fact, students who have had schooling abroad and then renter Japanese schools are discouraged from using the English skills they have mastered. Over a period of time, the teacher realized that what she could best do to teach English in Japan was work with adults in and around the city and the public school system. Teaching English to adults in PTA groups and night classes for a city labor union group proved to be of value to all involved. (Contains 8 references.) (CR)

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AMERICAN TEACHERS WORKING WITH JAPANESE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN JAPANESE SCHOOLS

"An American View of Educational Contradictions"

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AMERICAN TEACHERS WORKING WITH JAPANESE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN JAPANESE SCHOOLS

"An American View of Educational Contradictions"

Introduction

In the spring of 1992, I applied for an English teaching position in the Japanese city of Nishinomiya in southwest Japan. The position was advertised as follows:

OPPORTUNITY TO TEACH IN JAPAN AVAILABLE

> An opportunity to teach English As a Second Language in Japan is available for a twelve month period starting in August. The college of Education at Washington State University (WSU), Pullman, Washington which has an educational partnership agreement with the Nishinomiya Board of Education, is now accepting applications for **English teacher** positions in the Nishinomiya School System.
>
> Teachers in these positions are expected to engage in junior high teaching and serve as **English language consultants** to Japanese teachers of English. A master's degree is preferred but not required. A teaching certificate and/ or successful teaching experience is/are required. Sensitivity to other cultures, a willingness to participate in Japanese culture and contribute to the partnership are other selection criteria. **Knowledge and experience of teaching English** will be a high priority.

I interviewed, was offered the position and would be representing WSU in Japan for a year. I was pretty excited about the prospect of living for a year in Japan. I was motivated to apply and interested in going for several reasons: I visited Taiwan some years ago and became instantly interested in Asia, I have always wanted to live in another culture, I am old enough to have lived through W.W.II and be able to remember part of it including my own country's involvement with Japan, and I have a Japanese brother-in-law. While I have experience as an English teacher (I currently teach Social Studies), I did not approach the position with more than a usual interest in teaching English to the Japanese , but clearly

as one reads the advertisement for the position, teaching of English is what the position is about. However, as time went, I did develop a burning interest in doing just that. So, I gathered and prepared materials which I imagined would facilitate the teaching of my native language as a foreign language.

Expectations

I arrived in Japan at the end of July in anticipation of beginning work August 1, 1992, even though school would not begin till the early part of September. It was all very exciting. I was met by a car load of people from the Board of Education which turns out to be not an elected group of lay people as in the United States, but rather the department within the City of Nishinomiya which operates the public schools of the city. Board of Education people were most helpful, loading a year's worth of clothing and belongs up three flights of stairs to my apartment, providing a starter load of food in the refrigerator, and inviting me immediately to a party at the Board of Education office at City Hall and then to dinner. They provided a most generous introduction to the country.

In the days that followed, I went to a five day language camp in a wonderful facility where I met my first Japanese English teachers (JETs) and about fifty junior high school students from around the city. The language camp program was well organized, and the Japanese teachers did a fine job of providing a variety of English language teaching activities. I was surprised, though, that even after the teachers made a plea that all activities and conversation be done in English, neither the teachers nor the students in fact spoke English much at all. The teachers explained on questioning by the native English speakers that not much could be done in actual spoken English because the kids could not really speak well enough.

Through August, I had a chance to spend time working at the Board of Education office preparing a letter of introduction to the principal of the school I would be assigned

first, developing lesson plans for anticipated lessons, wandering the neighborhoods of my apartment building looking at people and places, and saying hello in Japanese to anyone with whom I could make eye contact. Making eye contact was easy enough with old and young people who would reply with a smile, a giggle and/or a greeting in either Japanese or English depending on their level of bravery. People of the in between ages, the ages of most Japanese teachers of English, would seldom make eye contact and were to remain for many reasons fairly unresponsive through all my time in Japan. But the old people and the young were interested that I was there and were willing to greet me, a fact that delighted this newcomer. I theorized that the old people were used to foreigners and English speaking people because of the Allied occupation after W.W.II and the young because they were currently dealing with English and an occasional native speaker of English in school. Many times, I would be pleased to practice my Japanese greeting only to be surprised at the English "hello" that I got in return.

Often through my time in Japan, I had people stop me on the street or in the office to ask me to speak English with them. They usually told me they spoke little English, gesturing with their index finger and thumb to show a small amount, but wanted to practice and very much wanted to be better at it than they were. I accommodated them whenever I could. Jane Condon in her book, *A Half Step Behind-Japanese Women Today*, interviews a woman who comments:

> I want to continue my English studies though, so two days a week I listen to the English-language programs on NHK-TV from 7:00 to 7:30 in the morning. I also listen to the radio lessons everyday, Monday through Saturday.... I take English correspondence courses for 42,000 yen a month (about $420). (p 170)

Surely in the beginning of my stay in Japan, I was impressed that some people spoke English, and of those, more than a few were willing to try their English out on a native speaker. Too, I had heard from some of my brother-in-law's relatives that the City of Nishinomiya was known for its aggressive English program tied, they believed, to the

Kansai area's (Kansai economic/ cultural region associated with Osaka, as opposed to the Kanto region that includes Tokyo) assertive efforts at trade with the Pacific Rim including those countries that speak English. The fact that I and others like myself were in Japan to teach English was, I believed, a testament to the fact that the Japanese really wanted to learn English in order to better communicate with the world.

Reality

However, my original impressions and expectations began to fade as my stay lengthened. In my letters home within a month of my arrival, I wrote:

> Thursday I and another American teacher went to lunch with two Japanese women teachers of English. They took us to a nice place in Kobe, a French restaurant. It was fun to talk with them. Their English is quite good, and they are interesting people. They gave us another perspective on American teachers and how the Japanese teachers view us. As you might expect, those Japanese teachers who speak English well like having American teachers. Those who do not, are not so happy with the program. I would like to develop some fun, non-threatening programs to help the Japanese English teachers, but I know that won't be easy. I suspect the good would get better and the weak remain weak.

I went on in my letter to say:

> Monday I go to my first school to meet the principal and the Japanese English Teachers (JETs). I know I have one, an older JET, who does not really like American English teachers (AETs) there. The rest are OK with one being pretty positive; at least that's the view of my lunch friends.

School began in September; the beginning of the second trimester which would end in late December, Christmas usually. The third trimester would begin in early January and end the last of March. The new school year begins in the first weeks of April. So, classes were well underway when we Americans from eastern Washington state (WSU) were to begin our work in Japanese schools. I found right away that I would be invited into or scheduled into many classes; usually there were eighteen or so classes of English in any one school. But, it soon became apparent that there were some classes I would likely not be invited into beyond introducing myself as the current native English speaking teacher. It

seemed that the third grade teachers (9th grade) would generally avoid having me in, and the teachers who had less ability to speak English themselves would not be particularly interested in having me into their classes. Third grade teachers explained my absences from their classes by citing the need to study for end of the year examinations for admission to high schools. Condon says, writing of a Japanese teacher of English:

> He says Japanese students are pressured 'every day from elementary school until college.' Although he approves of the use of discussion as in classrooms, he admits frankly that, 'In Japan, we don't have time.' As an English teacher, he regrets that the number of weekly foreign language classes has been cut back from four to three and that only ten minutes out of a thirty-minute lesson can be spared for conversation, because 'The entrance exam tests vocabulary and grammar, not how well the students can speak.' (p172)

I came to find that such a statement about studying for end of the year examinations for ninth grade really meant study specifically grammar for such exams. By the end of the first month of teaching, I commented as follows in my letters:

> This week I teach third grade; actually for two weeks. This is the hardest grade to get into and to teach because they are jaded and less than interested in school, at least daytime school. Many of the serious students go to Juku and depend on that for their education. So, they sleep in class or at least are not seriously involved. The third graders take high school entrance exams in March, so they are stressed about that. But they depend on Juku (private evening and weekend cram schools) to get them through.

The other type of teacher who kept me out of classes were the ones who almost never used any spoken English in their lessons and who had limited ability to communicate verbally in English. Those folks tended to stay as far away from me in a day as possible. Even the English teachers who could speak English fairly well rarely actually did so. I remember one time standing out in a hallway visiting in English with a JET between classes. Students were standing around in awe. They finally, excitedly, told us that they did not know their teacher could speak English; they had never heard him do so. With respect to my first school assignment, I made the following comments in my letters home:

> There are six English teachers here; two for each grade. Two of the men are quite good, two of the men don't speak much English, and one of those has a degree in English Literature. He is an older fellow who was a child during W.W.II and does not really like the idea of Americans. He must do well as a grammar teacher because his students do well on district and state tests. The other man seems to be a weak teacher and does not know much English. He is not trained as an English teacher and I am told doesn't want to be one. The two women teachers speak fairly well. That information according to the AET who was here last fall or spring.

I gradually determined Japanese teachers rarely taught their English classes in English. They taught about English, both grammatically and culturally, but they did so in Japanese. They taught their students to read and to an extent write English but steadfastly avoided teaching them to speak or understand spoken English. It remains a paradox that even those teachers who participated in intensive language training in the United States, rarely taught their classes in English, apparently no more so than they had done before the training. Whatever the training did, it seems not to have encouraged the oral use of English in the classroom.

An early surprise for me was to find that often the best and/or most willing English speakers in a school were teachers of other subjects. It seems that all teachers, and for that matter college graduates, have about the same amount of verbal English training; very little to none. Although, college graduates have eight to ten years of English language study. At the beginning of my time in Japan, I was amazed that so few of the teachers of English actually could use the language for communication purposes and that such a small portion of the population, given that there is a ninety percent or better graduation rate from high school and graduates have had at least six years of English training, actually feels it has learned a useable language. The International Society for Educational Information based in Tokyo, in 1985, provided the following student comment with regard to the student's view of English competence:

> Three hours each are allotted every week for science and English. I do best in English. My father says any language may be taught during the foreign language class. At some private schools, German and French are taught in addition to English. However, only English is taught at most schools in

> Japan. I guess because English is the most widely spoken language in the world. English grades on entrance exams to both high schools and colleges are very important. At any school, emphasis is put in English speaking ability.
>
> Because it is extremely embarrassing not to be able to give the right answers in class, I study English every day at home using cassette tapes. Although I have mastered all the English conversation patterns in our text book, I wonder whether I would be able to answer in English correctly if I was asked questions by an English-speaking foreigner regarding, say road directions. I do not have a lot of confidence. (p26)

In my letters, I wrote the following about the view of the teachers of my first school with respect to their feelings of competence with spoken English:

> I had lunch with the same women I ate with yesterday. They want to speak English. They say they have taken eight years of English but do not have any chance to speak it. Their eight years were mostly or exclusively vocabulary or grammar. Not too useful. They would like to speak the language.

However, in general *most* teachers tended to stay away from native speakers of English, particularly at first. I found that as we did social activities together that involved drinking, many teachers relaxed and then would risk speaking in English and seemed to enjoy the experience.

Another early surprise for me was to discover the difficulty that "returnees" have as they reenter Japanese schools from time abroad; particularly from English language education experiences. I expected that children returning would be welcomed in the English classes because they often clearly had mastered English. They should have, I thought, been utilized in English classes in all sorts of ways and be expected to do well on exams. Instead what I found, and later read about, was that those students with the English training were either neglected and so discouraged from using their second language or in some cases out and out shunned if they attempted to use English. And, since they had not studied the specific grammar, and sometimes antiquated language patterns, they often did not get particularly good English grades. Chi Nakane in *Japanese Society* discusses throughout the book the isolation of the "different" individual. Conformity is everything.

People who are outsiders or who choose to behave as such will find a lack of acceptance in their own culture. Nakane suggests:

> ...group consciousness and orientation foster the strength of an institution and the institutional unit is in fact the basis of Japanese social organization... (p 3)
>
> People with different attributes can be led to feel that they are members of the same group, and that this feeling is justified by stressing the group consciousness of 'us' against 'them'...and by fostering a feeling of rivalry against other similar groups. (p10)
>
> The consciousness of 'them' and 'us' is strengthened and aggravated to the point that extreme contrasts in human relations can develop in the same society, and anyone outside 'our' people ceases to be considered human. (p21)
>
> An extreme example of this attitude in group behavior is the Japanese people's amazing coldness (which is not a matter just of indifference, but rather of active hostility), the contempt and neglect they will show for the people of an outlying island, or for those living in the 'special' *buraku* (formerly a segregated social group now legally equal but still discriminated against). Here the complete estrangement of people outside 'our' world is institutionalized. (p21)
>
> Employment with a foreign firm in Japan is regarded somehow as out of the system. In spite of the very high salary, very few well-qualified men are ready to take a job in these firms. This reluctance comes first from the feeling of insecurity about the future [as relates to lifetime employment]. Secondly, foreign firms are somehow beyond the pale of Japanese social recognition, so that their employees are likely to be regarded as not part of the Japanese community; this is something not to be readily tolerated by a Japanese. (p119)
>
> [While living away from Japan]...the Japanese community tends to remain aloof from both the local people and other foreigners. Paradoxically, the rare Japanese who does develop a very close contact with local people will probably cut himself off from other Japanese in the community. (p140) There is no alienation, loneliness or irritability comparable to that of the Japanese whose work takes him to a foreign country. (p 141) It is clearly a social 'minus' to have been away. In fact, it often happens that the promotion of a man who stayed abroad for a certain period of time is delayed longer than that of his colleagues who have served continuously in the main office. (p142)

All of Nakane's comments indicate that being associated with "outsiders" has potential to cause English competent students social isolation and hostile treatment from the general Japanese student population. Condon goes on to show the negative acceptance of

Japanese who tie too closely to foreign ideas, language, or people, as she interviews a Japanese parent who says:

> Overall, living in a foreign country is very good experience for children, but once they return to Japan, the Japanese schools aren't very accommodating. The children have trouble adjusting back to the more strict educational system. It's too bad that the Japanese schools don't value the experience of living abroad. But it will be helpful to my children when they finish their studies and join the workaday world. Speaking English is much more useful for girls, though, than for boys. It's enough to get them a good job. (p126)

Thomas P. Rohlen says it a different way, but the message to stay Japanese is the same. Rohlen says in *Japan's High Schools*::

> There are clear limits to[teacher encouragement of extracurricular activities]. Take the case of a ...junior who had been selected to spend a year in the United States as an American Field Service exchange student. His spoken English was already far superior to that of his English teacher, and a year living with a family in [the US] would make him virtually bilingual. The teachers saw the matter differently. Spoken English, to begin with, is not on the university entrance examinations, and nothing the boy would learn during a year in an American high school would be of any help, either. During that year the student would begin to forget the exam-relevant material he had learned. ... he would slip from being a strong candidate for Tokyo University to one whose chances were slim. Since the boy was adamant [that he go], he would do an extra year after his return, making up the time "wasted" abroad. (p26)

And, Stevenson, Azuma and Hakuta in their book, *Child Development and Education in Japan* comment as follows about returning students:

> In recent years many Japanese children have been raised and educated outside Japan because of their parents' jobs. Such children provide an interesting glimpse into the differences between cultures, for their education after returning [to Japan] has become a major problem in Japanese education. (p9)

The last word on this comes from the *Japan Times*; an English language newspaper in Japan:

> In some of the cases in which returnee children are ostracized by other students, it has been said, the attitude of teachers cast a subtle shadow on students.
>
> *Japan Times*, Editorial, 9/8/94

Nishinomiya and many cities in Japan, especially those with a large dependence on foreign trade, have developed programs to support returning students. The Ministry of Education realizes that a tremendous resource is lost as returning students rather quickly abandon English for a more "socially and politically acceptable" language.

Interestingly too, early on I found that even some teachers react negatively to fellow teachers who attempt speaking English. One teacher I met later in my stay in Japan had returned from the US and a program of intensive English language training at Washington State University just a week after I began teaching at his school. All the English teachers and I eagerly awaited his return to Japan. His first day back, he came to my desk in the teachers' room, introduced himself and talked excitedly and at length about his experiences. After we talked, people began to tease him in Japanese about his facility with spoken English. I could not understand the Japanese, but the gist of their comments was obvious. He appeared annoyed and embarrassed, and he never did the conversational thing again through my almost five months at his school. He only spoke to me regarding lessons. And he rarely used spoken English in his teaching. He had been eager; then he had been effectively shut down by his fellow teachers and, I might add, his principal.

Toward the end of my stay in Japan, I worked with an English teacher who was really quite able to use the language in its many forms. She had been trained as a translator, had studied in the intensive language program at Washington State University and was really quite able to speak English. Even with that, she did not do much teaching in English. One afternoon after school, she and I were talking when she told me that on Sunday she would be meeting with her English study group. My ears perked up. This had to be a special teacher who studied English during free time. I asked what the group did. She said that it was a group of lay people who were interested in English. They read English language magazine articles (*Time*, that week) and discuss the content of the articles. Sounded good to me. Then I thought to ask if they discussed in English or

Japanese. She looked at me in a startled way and said, "Why in Japanese, of course." I asked why they did not discuss in English since their intent was to better manage the language. She again looked a bit startled and said, "It just does not seem right for Japanese people to speak to each other in English." This view, though I later understood its origin to be tied to language as a function of social hierarchy, makes it difficult for Japanese English teachers to develop the skills needed to teach English conversation.

Clearly, part way through my first year in Japan, it became clear to me that my interest in teaching English as a means of communication was not even close to being universally accepted by the Japanese teachers with whom I worked or the school system that employed me. The Japanese seemed to be teaching English as a type of technical, almost mathematical, skill. They seemingly wanted to be able to dissect the language; to read and to a lesser degree write it (often using archaic style). The examinations of English for school entrance are very technically based. They do not at all test useful English in the sense of skills needed for listening to English language radio, television, and films or the speaking needed for travel, trade or general commerce; the useful and desired stuff. I found it hard to believe that the entire country of Japan could do such a contrary job of teaching a second language. Clearly people who study the language beyond formal school, and there are many who do, seem to want to use the language, not just take a language examination or be able to read or possibly write.

I could not make sense of what I was being asked to do; pronounce words for English teachers, develop some concrete ways of introducing vocabulary, and provide some cultural understanding. When one considers that virtually every child in Japan studies English for a bunch of years, it seemed a monumental waste of time not to do it so that useful communication skills were taught along with reading and writing. And in fact, an interest in such skills is what prompted the development of the many programs in Japan that bring native speakers like myself into the country to help teach. Yet Rohlen says of the Japanese:

> The Japanese clearly cannot speak English well, but their knowledge of written English is certainly better than the average foreign language ability of [US] college graduated. (p322)

And Benjamin Duke in, *The Japanese School* goes on to say:

> The international language of business and commerce is primarily based on English. The international language of science and technology is also heavily based on English. Every Japanese worker, the vast majority incapable of speaking English, has a basic understanding of written English and can, with the use of the dictionary, understand the content of manuals and reports published in English. Access to the international business, technical, and science community is thus made available in a sense to the entire working population of Japan; although in perspective, relatively few Japanese workers have a need to deal in English in any form during their working career. (p155)

It should be said here that the other AETs that I worked with were as frustrated with what we were doing or not doing as I was. At least one went home after one year feeling the whole effort at teaching English in Japan to be a huge waste of time. Others early on sat back and rode the waves, doing what they were asked but losing interest in developing more meaningful and effective ways of teaching our native language as a means of communication to the Japanese. We spent many evenings talking among ourselves about what the Japanese English program was really about; wondering why it seemed to be so ineffective and wondering why we made so little difference in terms of better teaching. We all agreed that the Japanese cultural experience was for us wonderful. And we realized that just our presence seemed good for the Japanese in the sense of our providing a bit more depth to their limited multicultural opportunities; we met people who had never encountered a foreigner. But teaching much English we were not.

I was so intrigued with the English program and its seemingly unusual orientation (lots of grammar; no speaking) and with the culture from which it emanated that I decided I wanted to stay another year and try to make sense of it. I read at least two daily English language newspapers while in Japan, and they constantly wrote of the poor English

language program, citing all the same problems I thought I saw. I spent a bit more than a year reading translated Japanese literature and books about Japanese culture, custom and politics trying to understand the basis for the educational system and its English program in particular. I talked to people and observed all levels of public education; kindergarten through high school and even a private college, in order to better understand what I was dealing with.

Meanwhile I began to relax about the actual teaching part of my life. I realized that it would not be what I wanted or expected it to be nor do what I thought should be done. I concentrated on learning what I could about the culture that I was living in. I concentrated on meeting people and coming to understand the many wonderful Japanese people that were a part of my life in Japan. With time, I began to find what I thought to be answers to the "whys" of English education in Japan. Once I had what I thought were some answers, I began to change my concentration away from attempts at better lesson plans and away from frustrated teaching in the public junior high schools toward a concerted effort at teaching in school related settings outside the actual public schools. Those efforts proved more rewarding for me in terms of contributions to useful English language education in Japan.

Some Reasons for the Difference Between Expectations and Reality

With time and attention, I came to the conclusion that there are a number of varied reasons why the Japanese English education program is viewed as less than effective by many, including most Japanese participants in public education; why what I expected to be doing in Japan never came to pass. I will attempt to enumerate these reasons in some logical order, but there really is a cyclical connection to the reasons; it is hard to tell what

came first, the chicken or the egg. I am convinced there are so many aspects of the Japanese culture that negate the process of English education that it is truly amazing such an educational program has survived relatively unchanged as many years as it has. It is a testimony in a sense to the diligence and conformity of the Japanese student that what most view to be such outdated education survives.

For one thing, English and Japanese are structurally quite different languages. In my experience, this fact makes it difficult but not impossible to teach English to Japanese students and Japanese to English speaking students. In English, the general structure of a sentence is Subject, Verb, Object. In Japanese the structure is Subject, Object, Verb. Even Chinese, which Japanese is derived from in part, has a similar sentence structure to English. English is truly difficult, I believe, for Japanese to learn. A letter to the editor of the *Japan Times*, sheds light:

> I share the author's [of a prior letter] view that Japanese people, in general, lack competence in foreign languages, particularly Western languages. That is due mainly to the immense difference between our languages and Western languages, including English. I have been exposed extensively to English spoken by nonnative speakers from various regions of the world and have not yet encountered a linguistic group that demonstrated as poor English competence (conversational) as the Japanese... I am no linguist, but my empirical experience suggests that our linguistic mentality as represented in our language is vastly different from that of English, which makes it extremely hard for us to learn English, and it is my observation that English speakers, by the same token, experience equal difficulty in penetrating our language and culture.
>
> Miki Tanikawa of Tokyo (letter to the editor)

For another, while I was in Japan, I read an article in a Western written English language magazine, *Kansai Timeout,* which I suspect was written tongue in cheek, but was never sure, which suggested the reason Japanese people have such trouble learning and using verbal English is that the jaw structure of Japanese people is such that it does not have sufficient dexterity to manage English pronunciation. This article was purportedly written by a Japanese dentist, it even had a photo of the dentist, who should know about jaw structure. I assumed that the article was published as just another "funny" explanation

for the poor performance of Japanese users of English; a common theme in this particular magazine. But I never saw any rebuttal to the article nor an explanation of its attempt at humor. I remembered the article for its ridiculousness from my perspective; clearly Japanese-American native speakers of English have no such jaw difficulties with English even though they have Japanese jaw structure, presumably. Still, it is one of the many strange explanations given, I think, for the failure of the national efforts to teach English as a foreign language in the public schools of Japan.

Then there is the idea that English and Japanese are culturally quite different languages. The cultural difference, this theory goes, does not prevent the Japanese from physically mastering the spoken and written versions of English, but it does inhibit the use of English amongst the Japanese themselves, and it does, I believe, make English a culturally confusing language for them. The Japanese language is quite class conscious. Norma Field in her book, *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor*, says:

> Japanese, like many languages, is extensively developed for the expression of social hierarchy. (p23)

As in many languages that evolve in a less than egalitarian society, Japanese has very definite distinctions based on gender, age and class. English speech simply does not easily allow for polite exchange between Japanese or between Japanese and native English speakers because it does not allow for the cultural distinctions needed within the Japanese culture. Speaking and writing in English is difficult in part for Japanese because it does not allow them to address various people politely based on their lifelong understanding of needed distinctions. Stevenson, Azuma and Hakuta say:

> It has often been pointed out that Japanese attitudes toward self-expression are quite different from western attitudes. Nagashima (1993) has pointed out that in contrast to the west, where it is the sender's responsibility to produce a coherent, clear and intelligible message, in Japan, it is the receiver's responsibility to make sense out of the message. For a Japanese to express himself or herself too clearly is impolite. It shows deficient empathy; the listener puts the speaker in the position of having to express his or her own opinions too explicitly. Such an attitude helps avoid confrontation, an adaptation well suite to people destined to live for

> generations in a restricted area without much room for mobility. In the classroom this view of the nature of messages characterizes the interaction process. The teacher avoids excessive prescriptiveness. The student may ask questions but should not force the teacher to confess ignorance... (p9)

A Japanese friend of mine, who uses English in all its forms very well, mentioned to me once that she felt a great deal more freedom to be honest and speak her mind when using English than she does when using Japanese. Another woman friend who is a native English speaker who has mastered Japanese said she found Japanese limited the freedom she has with English to address men.

Too, I suggest that English teachers in Japan are poorly trained to teach the language as a useful device for communication. They teach as they were taught. They don't know anything else. They did not learn to speak because their teachers did not know how to speak. Professors of English education at the various universities are not able to speak and cannot therefore teach their prospective teachers how to speak or how to teach oral English. Until recently, there was very little opportunity for English teachers to travel outside the country; such travel perhaps providing impetus to learn and to teach verbal skills. For one thing, most teachers have very few days off of teaching. Even though there is a summer vacation the entire month of August, most teachers have club duties and other duties associated with students and teaching that keep them tied to Japan for the time they might reasonably travel. For another, most Japanese teachers are, as in fact are most Japanese, reluctant to travel outside a Japanese tour group which provides almost no opportunity to use and practice whatever English speaking/comprehension skills they might have. As well, there has been such cultural and physical isolation over the centuries that the Japanese just do not have a sense of cultural comfort when out of their own environment.

Another problem with the teaching of spoken English has to do with the difficulty the Japanese have with losing face. When the Japanese teacher of English is faced daily

with a native speaker of English as in those people like myself brought in to help with English conversation, they are embarrassed that they are unable to manage the language as they know they should. Rohlen comments in his book:

> An extremely serious English teacher once blurted out to me when drinking together, 'I know I can't speak English, and your presence in school embarrasses me, but I study the fine points of English grammar, and this is more helpful to my students. They can use it on the exams.' (p244)

Ruth Bennedict suggests of Japanese in her book,*The Chrysanthemum and the Sword :*

> The punishment is that 'the world' will laugh at him. All his life ostracism is more dreaded than violence. He is allergic to threats of ridicule and rejection, even when he merely conjures them up in his own mind.(p 288)

> The teacher says, 'I cannot in giri to my name as a teacher admit ignorance of it,' and he means that if he does not know to what species a frog belongs he has to pretend he does. If he teaches English on the basis of only a few years' school instruction, nevertheless he cannot admit that anyone might be able to correct him. (p 152)

The concept of language tyranny or linguistic imperialism is common around the world and has not escaped Japanese thinking. To a degree, this feeling of a lack of control over her own language use comes from Japan's encounters with the West during W.W.II. Japan rejects the trappings of the conqueror as well one might expect. To some degree Japan's sense of linguistic superiority and corresponding fear of the intrusion of other languages, especially English, comes, I believe, from the years of physical isolation that has generated a really uniquely isolated world culture which has difficulty accepting the idea that the world is growing smaller and cultures more enmeshed. From a column by David Lazarus of the *Japan Times* comes this comment as a response to an earlier letter to the editor:

> Seiiko Yamasaki, a 45 -year employee of trading house Mitsui & Co. , feels pretty strongly about the use of English as an international language. 'It's a form, of oppression, one of the most blatant forms of discrimination,' he says. In fact, Yamasaki, speaks English very well... But it is his fluency in the artificial language Esperanto that prompts him to

> think English has imposed a cultural tyranny over the world and given native speakers an unfair advantage in business, diplomacy and entertainment.
>
> *Japan Times* (column "Seriously by David Lazarus) 1993-94

The Japanese early on told me they were unique in the world, and I gradually came to believe that they are. Too, the Japanese truly understand the imperialism of a forced language. They forced all the countries they occupied during W.W.II to learn Japanese and forced discontinuance of native languages. Japanese was the language of education in all the countries occupied by Japan during and prior to W.W.II. While some other languages are taught in Japanese schools, Chinese, French, and German in particular, far and away English is the dominant second language attempted in the country. There is not much choice in Japan of second languages on an individual level, and clearly English is the language of commerce around the world thanks to the fact that, "The sun never set(s) on the British Empire." I believe the Japanese emotionally resist learning English because they see it as displacing the really important world language, Japanese, and because they see it as the language of their conqueror. They know they need to learn it, but they don't want to.

Another aspect of the difficulty teaching useful English to the Japanese has to do, I believe, with the idea that the Japanese language is, as are many national languages, politicized. That is to say that the language is more than a means of communication amongst a group of people; it is in fact a major part of the national identity of that group. I believe that another language even as a second language and even if it did not have a relationship to past wars, would have trouble being accepted in Japan because it would be viewed as a betrayal of the national identity. Two quotes from Duke provide some understanding of the idea of politicization of the Japanese language; one shows the difficulty Japanese have accepting the language of another, even in order to serve one's own interests:

> ...a host of ... early notables stand out as foremost examples of the caliber of the Japanese who recognized the importance of the challenge of America and the West to Japan in the 1800's. It required tremendous effort and sacrifice on their parts to study in the West, learn Western languages, and live within Western societies in order to understand the Western challenge. (p19)

And the second quote gives an example of the connection between the Japanese language and its tie to nationalism:

> Japan has achieved total literacy in the Kokugo, literally the national language. In the daily school schedule, the subject listed for teaching language is not called Japanese,but rather...the national language.(p 51-52)

An issue related to linguistic tyranny that is discussed in the Japanese media constantly is the damage done to traditional Japanese by what are called "loan words." These are words that have come into common use in Japanese and are derived from the Japanization of foreign words, often English words. Sometimes loan words fill a need for an item or product that has no Japanese word equivalent as in "watshiatsu" which means white [dress] shirt; a clothing item imported a hundred or so years ago. The Japanese took the English words, combined, Japanized and named the item with a loan word. Other times the loan word replaces a word from Japanese, so there are two words; one Japanese and one loan, that mean the same thing. For example, "chawan" is the traditional Japanese word for a cup, and "koppu" is a Japanized version or loan word from English for cup. It is this second class of words, two words for the same meaning, that most annoys the Japanese linguistic purists who believe that if there is an existing Japanese word, it should be used. I believe the purists reject the teaching of English as a second language because they see it as a constant threat to the purity of the Japanese language. A series in the *Japan Times* between two writers of letters to the editor explains another way the Japanese may "taint" their language with loan words or derivatives of foreign words. The first writer says:

> My theory is that these brand names (Creap, for example; a heavily used, powdered creamer product in Japan) are the work of a single *gaijin (foreign)* copywriter- one who, notwithstanding having lived here for years, bears much ill will toward Japan.
>
> "The damage in incalculable," *Japan Times* letter to editor by Daniel Scherr 1993-94

The second writer, presumably the gaijin mentioned above, responds:

> While some of Scherr's assumptions are correct, others are off the mark. Honesty prevents me from taking credit, as much as I'd like to, for some of the words that he attributes to me. CREAP is one such word. If you've lived in Japan as long as this gonzo copywriter is supposed to have, you would be familiar with the Japanese love of copying, but with a little change so 'it's not really copying,' but rather 'making it better.'
>
> The first and most famous nondairy creamer in the United States was called PREAM (it had, and still has, a yellow label with red block lettering). The makers of this product took the word 'cream,' dropped the 'C,' and replaced it with a 'P,' hence 'PREAM.' The folks who gave us the Japanese version while staying with the same color scheme, decided to drop the last letter ('M') instead of the first and still replace it with a 'P,' giving us CREAP.
>
> "Keepin' on with Japlish" *Japan Times*, letter to the editor by name withheld 1993-94

The fear of linguistic imperialism is probably exacerbated by the fact that the national government of Japan has been, and to a large degree still is, dominated by men who were officers in the Japanese military at the end of W.W.II. The group, I came to believe, has a deep dislike for the "conqueror" while at the same time a realization that coexistence is a must. These same men are the directors and officers of the Japanese Ministry of Education. They have been very slow over the last fifty years to see that English education is largely not effective in the public schools except as a further means of selection for high school or college entrance. That said, the Ministry of Education has in very recent years, I believe from my reading of the English press in Japan, come to the realization that useful English is important and that the time and money spent in English education as it is now constituted is not well used.

22

> [The] Ministry of Education has recommended putting stress on 'cultivation of ability to communicate' that emphasizes speaking and hearing rather than reading and writing, as has long been the custom.
>
> *Japan Times*, Editorial, Spring, 1994

Which brings up the next problem, as I see it, with effectively teaching English as a second language; of English education improvement. The national government which basically controls Japan does not, in my view, have a means of making effective and timely change. The decision making process in Japan, as for example in the Ministry of Education, is one of consensus and is very slow in its development. And consensus is clouded by the many political and emotional factors mentioned above. As a result, change in Japan happens at a very slow pace. The need to change public school English education and its concentration on grammar study, vocabulary, and reading for purposes of entrance examinations to the exclusion of the study of spoken and written English is immediate, and the probability of change happening with any dispatch is non-existent in my estimation. According to an editorial in the *Asahi Shimbun* (newspaper) referring to an earlier *Japan Times* editorial and reprinted in the *Japan Times*: :

> ... the *Japan Times* suggests four considerations with regard to the improvement of English education: "First is the improvement of teacher's ability." Second, is the question of how English is taught (class size of 40 students is a concern; what grade to introduce foreign language is a concern). Third is the problem of how to change the English curriculum in the face of the college entrance examinations. Last is the concern that **"...the poverty of the ability to speak one's mind is not a question of English education alone. Unless the education at schools changes and comes to value students' awareness of problems and ability to think on their own, students will not be able to speak in English, or in any other language for that matter.**(*Asahi Shimbun*)"
>
> *Japan Times*, Editorial, Spring, 1994

23

CONCLUSION

I believe Japan is and has been involved in a less than conscious national effort to massively stonewall the effective teaching of English as a second language in all its forms in Japan for most of the reasons enumerated in this paper and probably a few more that I was unable to see. In my view, essential change for English education in Japan comes down to two possibilities; either English education must seriously include the teaching of verbal skills and the cultural understanding that would allow the incorporation of English into the broader scope of life in Japan for business, for literature, film and cultural enjoyment , and for travel, or the requirement for English as a second language in public junior and senior high schools should be dropped so the incredible amount of public money spent on the teaching of the language in the public schools might be better spent on other national problems. English could still be a part, but not at public expense, of the quite large private school system, where it is taught to the financial or talented elite of the population which is more likely to put it to use in leadership positions, business, and trade than are graduates of the public school system.

The problems with coming to the changes I suggest here are several. One has been mentioned; the problem of making quick, decisive change. The Japanese system of decision making does not allow for rapid change. Another is the problem of the portion of the Japanese domestic economy that is tied to the business aspects of English as a second, if poorly taught, language. There is a huge national textbook industry dependent in part on English education; there is a huge national business of private English language schools and Jukus (cram schools), and there are nationally thousands of public school teaching and professorial positions tied to the teaching of English as a second language. Any change in the national requirement that **all** students, grades seven through college study English has significant economic implications.

I do believe that the Japanese public sees the problem, that the Ministry of Education sees the problem and that educators see the problem. When and if changes come about remains to be seen. Meanwhile, native English teachers, whether they be American or other, will continue to be baffled by the seeming difficulty they have working in Japan with Japanese teachers of English and the Japanese English language program.

That is not to say that the experience I had working in Japan was a waste at all, either for me or for the people I ultimately worked most effectively with. I brought back from Japan a wealth of understanding about the Japanese and Asian life that I will share with my future American students. And, I passed on to many people in Japan an understanding of multicultural America. Too, I made connections with Japan that I will maintain through my life. But, with time, I realized that what I could best do to teach English in Japan was work with **adults** in and around the city and public school system. In that vein, along side my usual teaching responsibilities in the junior high schools, I organized PTA conversation groups at the schools I was assigned. Those groups met regularly in the afternoon for purposes of giving PTA mothers a chance to practice speaking and to learn something of the culture of the West. I organized a conversation group that met regularly in the evening at my home for a group of junior high school women English teachers who were willing to speak English with each other; ultimately their own best source of support for developing skills of oral English. I taught a night school English class weekly for employees of the city labor union group; I spoke often to groups both public and private about English education, and I spent as much time as I could muster speaking English with the many wonderful people I count among my friends in Japan. These were not the things I intended to do most when I want to Japan to teach English, but I believe these efforts were of value to the Japanese and to me.

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